Rescuing Ambedkar

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The desecration of B.R. Ambedkar's statues indicates the failure on the part of political parties to inculcate social pluralism in caste.

At a time when B.R. Ambedkar has just come out on top in a nationwide poll to select the "Greatest Indian after Mahatma Gandhi", statues of the chief architect of the Indian Constitution are being vandalised in Tamil Nadu. Earlier in the year a statue was garlanded with chappals in Tiruchi. Now the heads of two statues in Madurai have been cut or knocked off, and even after two weeks neither has been replaced or fixed. Such assaults raise a host of complicated issues. One major question is: what do these frequent incidents of desecration in a State that has always been portrayed as progressive because of its rationalist and anti-caste movements imply?

For all the rhetoric of caste eradication in the State, these incidents arguably encapsulate the continued neglect of Dalit interests in Tamil Nadu. The desecration of the statues indicates the failure on the part of the Dravidian parties and nationalist parties such as the Congress to inculcate social pluralism in caste rather than communal terms. Typically, the response to the desecration of statues has been twofold: a failure to apprehend the miscreants and a plan to put the statues in protective cages. The caged Ambedkar statues, thus, will stand as a synonym for the containment of Dalit aspirations in the State. The Dalit writer and intellectual Stalin Rajangam (2011) argues that they have never given Ambedkar his due, using him only out of the compulsions of electoral politics as a symbol representing their concern about social justice. Indeed, it is only after the rise and critique of parties such as the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) that Dravidian leaders started routinely paying homage to Ambedkar statues on April 14.

Ambedkar was never an integral part of the Dravidian rhetoric of anti-Brahmanism or egalitarianism. Periyar [E.V. Ramasamy] was put at the centre, and Ambedkar, where he featured at all, was relegated to the position of a leader of Dalits who fought for the rights of the Scheduled Castes. There were no clear-sighted attempts by political parties and social movements in the State to explicate the fact that Ambedkar's contribution to non-Dalits was phenomenal. The political parties which thrive on concepts of social justice and democracy have failed to give proper recognition to Ambedkar and his ideology in their rhetoric or interventions despite the fact that Tamil Nadu is a State that has more reservation benefits for the intermediate castes than any other.

This failure by the Dravidian parties to take Ambedkar along with them is one of the key reasons why certain intermediate castes see him and his statues as caste-based challenges to the supremacy of their own leaders and icons. The proliferation of Ambedkar statues post-1990 is perceived as a threat which has often become the starting point for contests over public space. His absence from the language of Dravidianism, Rajangam notes, reinforces his image as the symbol of the conflict between Dalits and non-Dalits.

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During the 1990s, southern Tamil Nadu saw major caste clashes which went on for months. The powerful and emotive symbolism of public statues may be seen in the fact that it was often the desecration of statues of Ambedkar and the Forward Bloc leader U. Muthuramalinga Thevar that triggered violence in different localities. Ambedkar statues, in other words, have become synonymous with Dalit assertion, which in turn occasions an antipathy towards him from intermediate castes. What is lost in the process is Ambedkar's emphasis on institutionalising legal and political measures to even out the social distinctions, inequalities and injustices of a caste-ridden society, which ultimately resulted in the provision of benefits to all deprived sections of society, including the Backward Classes.

Identity formation

Former editor-in-chief of The Hindu, N. Ram, in an article titled "Relevance of Ambedkar" (1991), notes how Ambedkar's lifelong concern with religion, morality and justice in the idealistic sense was marked by a concerted attempt to get the intellectual, social and political measure of these. Ambedkar displayed a scholarly orientation, a commitment to the life of the mind and trained intellectual gifts that no other national figure in Indian politics has matched.

Ambedkar's national status was proclaimed much later by the Indian state in the 1990s with his birth centenary celebrations in the Mandal I era. This, along with the emergence of Dalit movements in the same period, saw a proliferation of statues across the nation to the point where Ambedkar's statues outnumber those of any other leader in Indian history. The historian Janaki Nair says that the new trend of deploying statues of Ambedkar in public spaces in cities and villages symbolises the self-assertion on the part of Dalits. This assertion signalled a new political identity where Ambedkar's statue became a new deity on the horizons of modern urban spaces. A process of Ambedkarisation, especially since 1990 (his centenary year), has seen statues, street and estate names, portraits, murals, posters and plaques pay homage to Ambedkar across India.

These statues stand as metonyms for Dalit assertion and the unfinished business of nation-building. Though all parties now honour Ambedkar's birthday, it is Dalits who perceive him as one of their own and jealously guard his image—resorting to violence where it is demeaned (Jaoul, 2006). As the historian Ramachandra Guha (2002) observes in his essay "Darling of the Dispossessed", Ambedkar statues are largely erected by Dalits, and the form the statues has taken is significant. For instance, he is usually depicted as a blue-suited, bespectacled man with a large book (representing the Constitution) under one arm. According to the canons of tradition and history, however, this man was not supposed to wear a suit of any kind. That he did was a consequence of his extraordinary personal achievements: a law degree from Lincoln's Inn, a PhD from the United States and another one from England, followed by a lifetime of mobilisation, a Cabinet position and the drafting of the Constitution. By memorialising him in a suit, Dalits are celebrating his successful storming of an upper-caste citadel.

The art historian Gary Tartakov (2008) says that Ambedkar's iconography in the form of statues plays a very important role in the cultural and political life of Dalits. Ambedkar in a three-piece suit indicates a man of modern education and civic status. The book in his hand augments this image, casting him as the enlightened one of the modern era who rejects the hierarchies of the past.

Symbols are central to how we understand and frame the world around us. The nations we live in and the communities we belong to are all founded on symbols of various forms. Especially in the context of high poverty and illiteracy, symbolic means have extensive political purchase and reach.

In this context, as the anthropologist Nicolas Jaoul (2006) argues, Ambedkar as a symbol of the Dalit struggle has profound political implications and has helped to promote ideals of and aspirations towards citizenship among the most marginalised. Dalit struggles to insert "their" iconic symbol into public spaces, he notes, are "the focal point for renewed aspirations towards democracy" and important assertions of Dalits' acceptance within wider society. As early as the 1950s, research in Uttar Pradesh found that the Scheduled Castes perceived the Constitution "gifted to them by Ambedkar" as a counter to Hindu caste laws and codes (Moller-Mahar, 1958). Despite his protestations, therefore, it is easy to find those who see Ambedkar as a god-like figure. Desecration of or insults to Ambedkar, thus, routinely result in protest as they are interpreted as a symbolic exclusion of Dalits from the body politic.

The insertion of Ambedkar into public space—through textbooks, statues, street names and portraits—stands as a proxy for the inclusion of Dalit concerns and issues. Insults to Ambedkar, by extension, highlight the continued marginalisation of such voices in national spaces and narratives. There is, however, a paradox here. While the occupation of public spaces with such symbols inspire Dalits with aspirations and pride, Ravikumar—activist and theoretician of the Dalit movement and Tamil Nadu legislator between 2006 and 2011—argues that "if we allow caste pride, we can never achieve the annihilation of caste, nor even equality among castes" (2009, page 280).

Dalit movements, in fact, have prompted the formation of (often aggressive) counter-movements which have responded to Dalit assertion with "extravagant revenge" (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998, page 54). Alongside the jubilation at shedding a "slave mentality" has been the anguish and fear that attends caste atrocities. It is a supreme and demoralising irony of such conflicts that Ambedkar statues themselves have become the targets of new expressions of casteism. The Ambedkar whom Nehru recognised as the "jewel in his Cabinet", however, has struggled to receive the acclaim consonant with his stature.

Ambedkarisation in Tamil Nadu

V. Purdie-Vaughns and R. Eibach (2008) identify how marginalised and subordinate groups—and especially "minorities within minorities", such as Dalit women—are rendered "invisible" through three key processes: firstly, historical invisibility refers to the absence or misrepresentation of such groups from mainstream historical narratives; secondly, cultural invisibility points to the systematic devaluation of subaltern cultural forms and the failure of national cultures to incorporate the distinctive experiences that subordinate groups face; and thirdly and finally, they point towards the political invisibility occasioned by the neglect of issues pertaining to the marginalised by even those groups that claim to be inclusive.

It is telling, from this perspective, that the insertion of Ambedkar into popular consciousness took off in Tamil Nadu only in the post-1990 era. The insertion of Ambedkar into public space was not, in other words, a Dravidian project but an outcome of the Dalit and Most Backward Classes (MBC)

upsurge in the 1990s. Indeed, before this point Ambedkar was not only absent from plinths but was hardly featured in the educational material provided by the Tamil Nadu Textbook Corporation to schools across the State. His legacy was kept alive by small movements and trusts dedicated to Dalit empowerment.

Paradoxically, it was Dr S. Ramadoss, head of the Pattali Makkal Katchi (Toiling People's Party), who initiated the move to erect multiple statues of Ambedkar. The name of the party—which emerged out of the Vanniyar association—and the attachment to Ambedkar indicate his grasp of the concept of bahujan, cross-caste politics. But this leader, however, earned the nickname "the hut burner" because of the actions of his followers in setting cheris (slums) alight. He came to be seen as antithetical to Dalit interests to the extent that the VCK emerged in the northern districts of the State as a direct opponent of his party.

If Ramadoss' engagement with Ambedkar was symbolic and superficial, the 1990s witnessed the emergence and flourishing of a vibrant Dalit literature and a cultural movement that promoted hitherto neglected or despised Dalit folk art forms and sought to revalue them and bring them into the mainstream. Significantly, Dalit interventions of this period, unlike that of earlier activists, made an entry into the popular media and began to carve out a space for Dalits in the mainstream.

More significant for the masses, especially given the literacy rates at that time and the stranglehold exercised by the visual media on political communication, was the proliferation of symbols in the form of Ambedkar statues, flags, banners and posters. Indeed, much Dalit assertion has rested on symbolic forms such as the call to "hit back" and the occupation of space with flags and statues. To understand the significance of Dalit movements and the symbolic and spatial importance of the emblems of assertion, we must examine the social roots of protest.

"The Untouchables, as very impure servants," L. Dumont points out, "are segregated outside the villages proper" (1980, page 47). Even today in many villages Dalits cannot use the same wells or enter the same temples as others, nor can they enter the main village on bicycles or use barber shops without permission from dominant caste patrons.

Any unwarranted incursion—physical (cycling through), symbolic (flags and statues) or aural (playing Ambedkar songs)—into the village proper resulted, and still often results, in verbal or even physical abuse. Social relations, as D. Massey (1994, page 168) observes, "always have a spatial form". The spaces occupied by Dalit estates serve as more than just homes and neighbourhoods; they constitute sites in which Dalits can be seen and represented and also controlled and contained. Crucially, even government programmes that are designed to alleviate the poverty of Dalits and provide better conditions for them have often culminated in the reproduction of marginality. The rows of small, single-room, concrete government "colonies"—the very name is instructive—are as sure a sign of a Dalit settlement as any that existed previously. Politically speaking, Dravidian parties have not elevated Dalit MLAs to positions of responsibility; they have been confined to the lesser departments of Adi-Dravidar Welfare or Animal Husbandry.

When Dalit movements raise their flags above the entrance to an urban housing block or unveil a painted board in the heart of a Dalit village, they are raising fundamental questions about the nature of public space and social interaction. Dalits, activists often assert, have been "confined in cheris" for too long. By this assertion, Dalit activists refer not only to isolated rural settlements but also to the

prevalence of Dalits in municipal work and the housing estates that accompany such employment. By struggling over and within the social spaces (voting booths, courts and commissioner's offices) to which they still lack equal access, Dalit movements are engaged in a negotiation of both their own identity and of the limits and possibilities of civil society.

Unsurprisingly, this has occasioned a backlash among those who feel that their dominance or status is threatened. Socially speaking, intermediate castes responded to the Dalit upsurge with violence, calls to prevent inter-caste marriages, and demands to be protected from inverse casteism. Politically speaking, Dalit political outfits were first cast as extremists—justifying police repression, including firing on demonstrations, lathi charges, preventive arrests and the use of the National Security Act and the Goondas Act to clamp down on political protest. When the VCK leader Thirumavalavan first contested elections in 1999, there was a wave of violence across his constituency that saw cheris set ablaze and Dalits prevented from voting.

More subtle forms of control also prevail, as in Finance Minister P. Chidambaram's recent insistence that "Dalits should not have separate parties" but should join national ones instead. Such counsel has hitherto not been issued to members of other caste outfits and groups. Chidambaram "pointed out that it was the Congress which was magnanimous enough to entrust Dalits with important portfolios in the government". This patronising and paternalistic assumption that Dalits do not earn places by right but are "entrusted" with posts highlights the continued marginalisation of Dalit political figures from public life in Tamil Nadu.

Mainstreaming Ambedkar

What we wish to suggest is that just as Gandhi cannot be seen as the sole property of the Congress party, Ambedkar, too, cannot be reduced to being a Dalit figure. The fact that he has come to be seen as a caste leader whose representations can be attacked by ignorant mobs bent on making political points highlights the continued marginalisation of this national leader. In the article cited above, N. Ram writes further: "What is impressive is that the giant whose moderately couched, constitutionally canalised socio-political revolt we are observing retains a formidable constituency—in terms of people, gut issues and social and moral dilemmas to be addressed by a complicated nation which needs to find its way out of a host of troubles."

For all this, it is Dalit leaders who come to the fore when Ambedkar is insulted, it is Dalit leaders who erect and honour Ambedkar statues, and it is Dalit leaders who are most likely to have read his works. It is an indictment of Dravidian politics that no place has yet been found for Ambedkar in the political mainstream. It is against this background that the emotive force of the cartoon row [over a cartoon reproduced in NCERT textbooks showing Ambedkar atop a snail and goaded on by a whip-wielding Nehru] makes sense because the issue is not simply confined to statues, cartoons and symbols. While the figure of Ambedkar alone is made to bear the weight of Dalit aspirations and expectations, his symbolic value is increased. Hence the vehemence of the reaction to a cartoon that Ambedkar himself saw as no big deal. When statues are routinely garlanded with slippers, vandalised and desecrated to thwart Dalit assertion, the mere suggestion that Ambedkar atop the snail was being goaded on by the whip-wielding Nehru was sufficient to cause a storm.

The question we should be asking is not why Dalit politicians like Thirumavalavan are overly emotional, but why Ambedkar is continually marginalised, humiliated and presented as a community leader? A high-profile book by leading academics, for instance, can speak of “India’s national culture” (Sen, 2003) with barely a mention of caste. Various visionaries, from Gandhi to Abul Kalam Azad, are excerpted, but there is no room for the insights of lower-caste and “untouchable” leaders like Jyotirao Phule or Ambedkar. If the 100th anniversary of his birth brought the image of Ambedkar into the mainstream, the challenge before us now is to educate people about his life’s work. Perhaps then he will finally be able to leave the cheris and assume his place in the national pantheon.

It is pertinent, in closing, to recall the political theorist Partha Chatterjee’s words: “Ambedkar is a staunch advocate of the interventionist modernising state and of the legal protection of the modern virtues of equal citizenship and secularism.” The continued desecration of Ambedkar statues and lack of respect for him demonstrate the inaction of the state in which he vested such faith and the persistent failure to inculcate the values of equal citizenship. Ambedkar’s birth anniversary celebrations have travelled as far as Austria, Hungary, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, but here in India we still hear him described as a caste leader, see his memory insulted, and witness his statues being vandalised time and again without understanding his contribution to the nation or realising his vision of an egalitarian and caste-free society.

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